DIVINE COUNCIL A term used by Hebrew Bible scholars for the heavenly host, the assembly of divine beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos under Yahweh, the God of Israel. All ancient Mediterranean cultures had some conception of a divine council, including Israel. However, Israelite religion's divine council was distinct. The structure of the Israelite divine council has implications for understanding God and the unseen world in biblical theology.

Textual Evidence and its Ancient Canaanite Context

The Council of the Gods / God. Most Bible translations show that Israel believed in an assembly of heavenly host under the authority of Yahweh. Modern translations do not show clearly that this assembly is similar to pantheons of ancient Near Eastern cultures. A close reading of the Hebrew text and comparisons with other ancient non-biblical texts from Canaan demonstrate this similarity (Mullen, Handy, "Host"; Cross "Epic"; Smith "Early"; Smith, "Origin"; Korpel, *Rift in the Clouds*).

The clearest example is the cuneiform literature from Ras Shamra (Ugarit), discovered in the late 1920s. As a Semitic language, Ugaritic is closely related to biblical Hebrew—it shares vocabulary, as well as morphological and syntactical features. Many of the Ugaritic tablets describe a council of gods in words and phrases that are conceptually and linguistically parallel to the Hebrew Bible. The Ugaritic divine council was led by El, the same word used in the Hebrew Bible for deity and as the proper name for the God of Israel (e.g., Isa 40:18; 43:12). References to the "council of El" include: *pḫr ʾilm* (assembly "of El" or "of the gods"; KTU 1.47:29, 1.118:28, 1.148:9); *pḫr bn ʾilm* (assembly "of the sons of El" or "of the gods"; KTU 1.4.III:14); *mpḫrt bn ʾilm* ("assembly of the sons of El"; KTU 1.65:3; compare 1.40:25, 42); and *ʿdt ʾilm* (assembly "of El" or "of the gods"; KTU 1.15.II:7, 11).

The Hebrew Bible has phrases that explicitly parallel these Ugaritic expressions (Parker, "Sons of [the] God[s]"; Cooke, "The Sons of [the] God[s]"). Psalm 82:1 is perhaps the best example. It calls the council (עֲדַת־אֵל, *adath-el*) and describes gods under the authority of Israel's God: "God (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) stands in the council of El/the divine council (עֲדַת־אֵל, *adath-el*); among the gods (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) he passes judgment." The second occurrence of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) must be semantically plural due to the preposition "in the midst of." This does not refer to the Trinity—Psalm 82 goes on to describe how Israel's God accuses the other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of corruption and sentences them to die "like humankind." This plurality does not refer to human beings. Psalm 89:5–7 places the God of Israel "in the assembly of the holy ones" (בִּקְהַל קְדֹשִׁים, *biqhal qedoshim*) and then asks "For who in the clouds (בַּשַּׁחַק, *bashshachaq*) can be compared to Yahweh? Who is like Yahweh among the sons of God (בְּנֵי אֵלִים, *beney elim*), a god greatly feared in the council of the holy ones (בְּסוֹד־קְדֹשִׁים, *besod-*

qedoshim)?" Psalm 29:1 commands the same sons of God (בְּנֵי אֵלִים, *beney elim*) to praise Yahweh and give him due obeisance. Divine "sons of God" (בְּנֵי אֵלִים, *beney elim*, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, *beney ha'elohim*; or בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, *beney elohim*) appear in other biblical texts (Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; and Deut 32:8–9, 43 (Septuagint; Qumran); Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8").

The Divine Abode and Meeting Place of the Divine Council. At Ugarit, the council of El and its gods met on a mountain or lush garden (Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain*). These descriptions are actually the same place. The abode of El was at the "source of the two rivers" (*mbk nhrm*) in the "midst of the fountains of the double-deep" (*qrb ʾapq thmtm*). El and his "assembled congregation" (*pḫr mʿd*) met to issue divine decrees from the "tents of El" (*ḏd ʾil*) and his "tent shrine" (*qrš*; KTU 1.1.III:23; 1.2.III:5; 1.3.V:20–21; 1.4.IV:22–23; 1.6.I:34–35; 1.17.VI:48). This description of gods living and meeting in "tents" (*ʾahlm*) or "tabernacles" (*mšknt*) is common at Ugarit (KTU 1.15.3.18–19). The Ugaritic god Baal, the deity who oversaw the council for El, held meetings on Mount *Ṣpn*. Baal's palace had "paved bricks" (*lbnt*) that made Baal's house "a house of the clearness of lapis lazuli" (*bht ṭhrm ʾiqnʾum*).

The Hebrew Bible uses similar place descriptions. The most obvious are the tabernacle (מִשְׁכַּן, *mishkan*) and Tent of Meeting (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, *ohel mo'ed*), both common in the Old Testament narrative. Yahweh also dwelled on mountains (Sinai or Zion; e.g., Exod 34:26; 1 Kgs 8:10). In Psalm 48:3 the Jerusalem temple is said to be located in the "heights of the north" (יַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן, *yarkethey tsaphon*). Mount Zion is the "mount of assembly" (הַר־מוֹעֵד, *har-mo'ed*), again located in *yarketê ṣpn* (יַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן, *yarkethey tsaphon*; Isa 14:13). Additionally, Zion is described as a watery habitation (Isa 33:20–22; Ezek 47:1–12; Zech 14:8; Joel 3:18). Ezekiel 28:13–16 equates the "holy mountain of God" (הַר קֹדֶשׁ אֱלֹהִים, *har qodesh elohim*) with Eden, the "garden of God" (גַּן־אֱלֹהִים, *gan-elohim*). Eden appears in Ezek 28:2 as the "seat of the gods" (מוֹשַׁב אֱלֹהִים, *moshav elohim*). The description of Eden in Gen 2:6–15 refers to the "ground flow" that "watered the entire face of the earth." At Sinai, Moses and others saw the seated God of Israel, under whose feet was a "pavement of sapphire stone" (לִבְנַת הַסַּפִּיר, *livnath hassappir*; Exod 24:9–10).

The Structure of the Divine Council. The divine council at Ugarit may have had four tiers, but the evidence is not conclusive (Smith, *Origins*, 41–53). A three-tiered understanding may be better.

The top tier consisted of El and his wife Athirat (Asherah). The second tier was the domain of their royal family ("sons of El"; "princes"). One member of this second tier, Baal, served as the co-regent of El. Despite being under El's authority, he was called "most high" (Wyatt, "Titles"). A third tier was for "craftsman deities," while the fourth and lowest tier was reserved for the messengers (*mlʾkm*), essentially servants or staff (Cho, *Lesser Deities*).

There is solid evidence in the Hebrew Bible for a three-tiered council. In the divine council of Israelite religion, Yahweh was the supreme authority over a divine bureaucracy that included a second tier of lesser אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), also called the "sons of God" (בְּנֵי אֵלִים, *beney elim*, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, *beney ha'elohim*, or בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים, *beney elohim*) or "sons of the Most High" (בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן, *beney elyon*). It may be significant that these "sons of God" are never clearly referred to as angels (מַלְאָכִים, *mal'akhim*) in the Hebrew Bible, as that word denoted the lowest tier of the Canaanite council, and thus a third tier in the Israelite version. Still, *mlʾkm* at Ugarit were considered gods, despite their subordinate role. It is possible that מַלְאָכִים (*mal'akhim*) are referred to as אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in the Hebrew Bible.

In Israel's divine council, the highest tier is different from the Canaanites' conception. Instead of El and Baal, his vice-regent, Yahweh occupied both slots in a sort of binitarian godhead (Heiser, "Divine Council"). Yahweh is described in the Hebrew Bible by means of titles and abilities that both El and Baal have in Canaanite literature—these two were conceptually fused in Yahweh. This literary and theological device shows Yahweh superior to the two main divine authority figures in wider Canaanite religion.

The way Yahweh filled the positions both of supreme ruler and vice-regent is also shown by His occasional visible appearances (Hamori "When"; Hamori, "Embodiment"; Sommer, *The Bodies of God*). For example, the Angel of Yahweh is sometimes indistinguishable from Yahweh (e.g., Exod 3:1–14). The Angel is said to have Yahweh's "Name" in him (Exod 23:20–23). Scholars have long noted the presence of a "name theology" in the Hebrew Bible (Mettinger "Dethronement"; Huffmon, "Name") where the name is another way of referring to Yahweh Himself. Thus, Yahweh was in the Angel, and yet Yahweh and the Angel could be simultaneously present (Judg 6). Both the God of Israel and the Angel are said to have brought Israel out of Egypt (Judg 2:1–3; 1 Sam 8:8; Micah 6:4)—an observation that makes Deut 4:37 an important consideration for binitarianism, since that verse tells us the "Presence" of Yahweh was responsible for the deliverance from Egypt. The divine presence must be understood as Yahweh Himself, His "essence" as it were. The angel—as co-regent—fills Baal's role as El's warrior. It is the angel who led Israel to the promised land as the captain of the Lord's host, "sword drawn in his hand" (חַרְבּוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בְּיָדוֹ, *charbo sheluphah beyado*)—a precise description found in only two other places in the Hebrew Bible, both of which describe the angel of Yahweh (Num 22:23; 1 Chr 21:16). The result is that—while orthodox Yahwism could not accommodate cosmic rule being shared by two separate and distinct

deities (El and Baal)—it could tolerate Yahweh in two personages. That the angel had the presence/name/essence of Yahweh in him, but was a distinct personage, meant he "was but wasn't" Yahweh.

The Israelite binitarian godhead is also indicated by the "rider on the clouds" motif in the Hebrew Bible. This epithet was a well-known title for Baal (Herrmann, "Rider upon the Clouds"). For orthodox Yahwists, Baal's attributes were taken over by Yahweh, their rightful bearer. The Hebrew Bible consistently refers to Yahweh as the one who rides the clouds (Psa 68:4, Psa 68:5 in Hebrew; 68:33, Psa 68:34 in Hebrew; 104:3; Deut 33:26; Isa 19:1) with one exception: the "son of man" in Dan 7:13. This character in Dan 7 is distinct from the enthroned deity, the ancient of days, who was expected to bear this Yahweh-title of the Hebrew Bible. This passage, along with the "man of war" (the angel) formed the basis for Judaism's doctrine of two powers in heaven, a point of orthodoxy until the second century AD (Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*).

The Hebrew Bible also informs us that at least some Israelites considered Yahweh to have had a divine wife, Asherah (2 Kgs 21:1–7; 2 Chr 15:16). The archaeological picture echoes this belief, most notably in the finds at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom, where inscriptions include prayers to Yahweh and "his Asherah" (Dever). It should be noted, though, that "his Asherah" may refer to a shrine and not the goddess (Hess, "Yahweh and his Asherah?"). It cannot be demonstrated that the theology of the prophets and biblical writers contained this idea, or that it was permissible. Other figures and motifs include "wisdom and the word" (Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*).

Decision Making in the Divine Council

In the Ugaritic council, members would sometimes challenge each other during their deliberations (Handy, "Authorization"). However, there are also passages in the Ugaritic material that nearly equate El with the entire council (Mullen, "Divine Council," 129, 142)—the decrees of the council are the decrees of El. The Israelite conception of the divine council also included deliberation and opposition, yet the will of God was ultimately done.

Council Member Participation. First Kings 22:19–23 is an important text regarding the participation of council members:

"And Micah said, ‘ (ʻ)Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, "I will entice him." And the LORD said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so." Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these, your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.’ "

Yahweh decided that Ahab should die, but allows discussion about how he should die. After some discussion, one spirit steps forward with a proposal. Yahweh accepts it and says that it will succeed.

Nothing in the passage suggests that Yahweh learns anything here, or that He didn't know what the suggestion would be. Nor does it support the idea that Yahweh predestinated the suggestion. The narrative only demonstrates that Yahweh allowed council members to choose how to carry out the decree.

The aftermath of the Babel incident shows that Yahweh expected that council beings use their own free decision making capacity. In Deuteronomy 4:19–20 and 32:8–9, Yahweh divided and assigned the nations to lesser gods (Heiser, "Sons of God"). Yahweh delegated authority—He rejected the nations as His own people and took Israel as His portion. While Yahweh is ultimately sovereign, He does not unilaterally govern the other nations. He leaves that to subordinates, who should rule according to His will. When they don't, they are judged. This is precisely the point of Psa 82, where Yahweh judges the gods of his council who are responsible for corrupt rule over the nations of the earth.

Yahweh's Will and Council Activity. Two examples of council deliberation in the book of Daniel make the council almost a part of Yahweh.

Daniel 4 contains Nebuchadnezzar's second dream. The announcement of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment is described in Dan 4:17: "The sentence is by the decree of the Watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men." Seven verses later (Dan 4:24) the sentence is described thus: "This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king." This line is followed by the ambiguous plural of 4:26: שַׁלִּטִן שְׁמַיָּא (*shallitin shemay'*). This Aramaic phrase can be translated either "heaven rules" (corporate personification), or "the heavenly ones rule" (council authority). The second seems likely—the decree is from the Watchers—but it is the (singular) Most High who rules.

Daniel 7 opens with the vision of the four beasts, symbols which parallel the four kingdoms in Dan 2. Daniel 7:9–12 describes a divine council meeting. "Thrones" (plural) are set up. The Ancient of Days is seated—the Son of Man does not sit. In Daniel 7:10 the "court" or council is then seated. The books of judgment are opened, and the fourth beast is killed. The jointly ruling Ancient of Days and the Council (and the Son of Man by implication) are identified with one another:

1. The judgment occurs after the council was in session. "The court shall sit in judgment and his dominion shall be taken away" (Dan 7:26).
2. In Daniel 2 the fourth kingdom is destroyed by the kingdom of God.
3. The kingdom of God in Daniel 7 is given by God to the Son of Man, who shares it with the "holy ones" of the Most High (Dan 7:25). These are probably not humans—humans are brought into joint kingship later: it "shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High" (Dan 7:27). "Heavenly ones" is a term that refers to the divine council elsewhere (e.g., Psa 89:5–6; Job 15:15).

The Saṭan. The *saṭan* (הַשָּׂטָן, *hassatan*) in Job 1–2 is not a proper name—it lacks the Hebrew definite article prefixed to the noun (Peggy Day, *An Adversary in Heaven*). This "Adversary" (the meaning of the Hebrew term) is therefore not the Devil, as known in the New Testament. Lowell Handy points out that the Adversary's behavior in Job 1–2 is consistent with that of various deities in council scenes in Ugaritic material, where a lesser deity reports to a higher deity (Handy, "Authorization"). The Adversary is the deity responsible for checking on the misbehavior of humans. He is actually not talking back to God, but pointing out that humans behave well if they are not under duress. Yahweh decides to test the Adversary's estimation, knowing full well that Job will endure.

Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible and the Divine Council

Biblical Polytheism? The presence of a divine council in the Hebrew Bible does not means that Israel's religion was at one time polytheistic (there are many gods) or henotheistic (there are many gods, but one is preferred) and later evolved to monotheism. Both views presume that the gods were equal. Archaeological remains and passages in the Hebrew Bible show polytheism in Israel, but this was not orthodox Israelite belief. The biblical writers refer to Yahweh as "*the* God" (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*; 1 Kings 18:39)—He could not be compared with any others. While Yahweh was an אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), He was unique among the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). The orthodox Israelite knew that only one deity was the pre-existent Creator of all things (Isa 45:18). His status as Creator prevented other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) from being equal. Yahweh was viewed as the Creator of the "host of heaven," the other divine beings (Pss 33:6; 148:1–5; compare Neh 9:6; Job 38:7–8; 1 Kgs 22; Isa 14:13; Deut 4:19–20; 32:8–9, 43; with Deut 17:3; 29:25; 32:17).

Understanding the Term אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*)

The Confusion of English Translations. Modern English translations often obscure the Hebrew text's plural אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), probably from a fear that it would undermine a belief in monotheism. For example, the NASB renders the second אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in Psa 82:1 as "rulers." Other translations are more faithful, opting for "gods" or "divine beings," but study Bibles usually note alternative readings like "rulers" or "judges." While rendering the second אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) "gods" in Psa 82:1, the NIV nevertheless in Psa 29:1 has "mighty ones" for *bĕnê ʾēlî̂ m* (literally "sons of the gods"). NASB ("sons of the mighty") and NKJV ("mighty ones") follow suit. The translations for Deut 32:17 are also obscure. There are two issues: whether to render אֱלֹהַ (*eloah*) as singular or plural and how to translate the verbless clause in which it appears לֹא אֱלֹהַ (*lo' eloah*). For example:

- ESV—“They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known …”
- RSV—“They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known …”
- CEV—“You offered sacrifices to demons, those useless gods that never helped you, new gods that your ancestors never worshiped.”

Translations which translate אֱלֹהַּ (*eloah*) as plural produce a reading that denies that שֵׁדִים (*shedim*, “demons”) are gods. Such translations, however, are forced to juxtapose this denial with the next clause, אֱלֹהִים לֹא יְדָעוּם (*elohim lo' yeda'um*) (“gods which they did not know”) which appears to clearly contradict that denial. How can the demons be gods and not gods in the same verse? Translations which take אֱלֹהַּ (*eloah*) as singular do not suffer this tension. There are in fact no occasions in the Hebrew Bible where אֱלוֹהַּ (*eloha*) is contextually plural or is used as a collective noun (Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:17”). Denying the existence of gods in Deut 32:17 means denying the existence of these demonic entities.

The Variety of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). There are a number of entities referred to as אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in the Hebrew Bible. This variety gives a clue as to how the term should be understood. It can be used to mean:

- Yahweh, the God of Israel (over 2000 times)
- The אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of Yahweh’s heavenly council (Psa 82)
- The gods of foreign nations (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:33)
- Demons (Deut 32:17)
- Spirits of the human dead (1 Sam 28:13)
- Angels (possible due to Gen 35:7, depending on the context of the plural predicator with אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*; subject)

The אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of Yahweh’s council in Psa 82 are divine beings, not human rulers. This is obvious from the parallel passage in Psa 89:5–8. In Psalm 82:6, the plural אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are called “sons of

the Most High." These אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are not human since Psa 89:6 (Psa 89:7 in Hebrew) locates their assembly or council in the clouds or heavens (בַשַּׁחַק, *vashshachaq*) not on earth.

With respect to 1 Samuel 28:13 (part of the "medium of Endor" narrative), the text tells us that, after being solicited by Saul to conjure the dead prophet Samuel, the medium exclaims, אֱלֹהִים רָאִיתִי עֹלִים מִן־הָאָרֶץ (*elohim ra'ithiy olim min-ha'arets*). The text could be translated two ways: "I saw gods coming up from the earth" or, "I saw a god coming up from the earth." Both are possible since the plural participle form could reflect the plural morphology of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). Saul's subsequent question helps us decide with a singular reading since he asks the medium in 28:14, "What is his (third masculine singular suffix) appearance?" The deceased Samuel who appears to Saul is an אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). While this might seem strange to us, the notion that the departed dead were "gods" (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) is similar to ancient Canaanite thinking.

In Genesis 35:7, אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) is the subject of a plural verb; and angels (מַלְאָכִים, *mal'akhim*) may be part of the context. Genesis 35:1–7 reads in part:

"God said to Jacob, ' (י)Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God (לָאֵל, *la'el*) who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.' So Jacob said to his household … ' (י)let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God (לָאֵל, *la'el*) who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.' And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him (or, "the gods revealed themselves to him"; נִגְלוּ אֵלָיו הָאֱלֹהִים, *niglu elaiw ha'elohim*) when he fled from his brother."

This passage is not referring to Gen 28—that was not the episode in which Jacob was explicitly described as fleeing from his brother. It seems to refer to Gen 32, in which Jacob has two encounters with the divine while fleeing from Esau. The lesser known of these two encounters occurs in Gen 32:1, where we read, "Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים, *mal'akhey elohim*) met him" (ESV). Upon seeing these beings, Jacob's response was the exclamation, "This is the camp of *elohim*" (Gen 32:1). In Genesis 32:22–32, Jacob wrestles with "a man" (Gen 32:24) whom Jacob refers to as *elohim* (32:32). The divine nature of the man is reiterated in Hos 12:3–4 (12:4–5 in Hebrew). This angel is also apparently deified in Gen 48:15–16 (ESV):

"And he blessed Joseph, and said, ' (')God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*), before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*) who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, The angel (הַמַּלְאָךְ, *hammal'akh*) who has redeemed me from all evil, bless (יְבָרֵךְ, *yevarekh*; note the *singular* verb) the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.' "

The plural verb form of Gen 35:7 may be due to the fact that both Yahweh and the Angel who is the visible Yahweh appeared to Jacob as he fled. However, the other angels of God may also be included in the plural verb form. Angels as אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) would agree with Canaanite culture and religion, and makes good sense in light of what the term אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) really means.

Defining the Term אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). The fact that five different entities are called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) shows that the word does not refer to only one set of attributes. This is the mistake of modern interpreters and translators, who are accustomed to using the term "god" only when referencing the God of Israel and His attributes. The biblical writers would not equate Yahweh in a qualitative sense with demons, angels, the human disembodied dead, the gods of the nations, or the gods of Yahweh's own council.

All the things called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in the Hebrew Bible have one thing in common: they all inhabit the non-human realm. That is, they are by nature not part of the world of humankind, a world of ordinary embodiment. אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) as a term describes residence—it identifies the proper domain of the entity described by it. Yahweh, the lesser gods, angels, demons, and the disembodied dead are all rightful inhabitants of the spiritual world. They may cross over to the human world, as Scripture informs us, and certain humans may be transported to their realm (e.g., prophets; Enoch), but their proper domain and humanity's proper domain are two separate places. Within the spiritual world—as in the human world—there are differences of rank and power. Yahweh is an אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), but no other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) is Yahweh. This was what an orthodox Israelite believed. Yahweh was not one among equals; He was unique. The modern term "monotheism," coined in the 17th century (MacDonald, "Deuteronomy and the Meaning of Monotheism," 1–21), only uses the term god to describe a being with attributes like Yahweh's. This does not reflect the Hebrew Bible's use of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). However, the thought behind the term—that Yahweh is utterly and eternally unique—is consistent with the sense of the modern word "monotheism."

"No Other Gods beside Me"?

Common phrases in the Hebrew Bible which seem to deny the existence of other gods (e.g., Deut 4:35, 39; 32:12, 39) actually appear in passages that affirm the existence of other gods (Deut 4:19–20; 32:8–9, 17). These phrases show that Yahweh is incomparable among the other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), not that the biblical writers contradict each other or that they are in the process of discovering monotheism.

Isaiah's "denial statements" express incomparability, not non-existence of other gods (Isa 43:10–12). Similar language is used in Isa 47:8, 10. Babylon claims, "I am, and there is none else beside me." The claim is not that Babylon is the only city in the world, but that it has no rival.

A close reading of Deuteronomy and Isaiah shows the denial language's context (Heiser, "Monotheism"). The denials are not based on any claim that other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) do not exist, but on Yahweh's unique qualities. In Isaiah 43:10–12, the reference points are Yahweh's pre-existence, ability to save, and national deliverance. In Isaiah 45, the focus is on Yahweh's justice, salvation, the deliverance of His children, and the impotence of the other gods. Yahweh is being compared to lesser gods—it would be empty praise to compare Him to beings that did not exist.

Human Beings as אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*)? The structure and terminology of Psa 82 shows that the psalm describes a council of divine beings (Mullen, "Divine Council"; Prinsloo, "Psalm 82"; Tsevat, "God and the Gods"; Kee, "The Heavenly Council"). The plural אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of Psa 82:1 are called "sons of the Most High" in 82:6. The orthodox Israelite knew that the Most High is Yahweh (Psa 83:18). The plural אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of the council are therefore "sons" of the God of Israel. Elsewhere the "sons of God" are obviously divine beings (e.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7–8). However, there is one passage, Hos 1:10, that uses a similar phrase of humans ("sons of the living God"), and Israelites on occasion were referred to as Yahweh's "sons" (Exod 4:22–23).

Psalm 82 and Psalm 89 in Tandem. Psalm 82's council of plural אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) would be ambiguous if it were the only example. Without context, it might seem to describe Yahweh presiding over a council or group of human judges. However, there is another passage that both uses the same language of divine plurality in a council and rules out that language with human beings.

Psalm 89:5–7 places Yahweh's council of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) "in the clouds." This shows that these "sons of God" are not humans—no text in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible suggests that there are a group of human judges in the heavens ruling with Yahweh over the nations.

Deuteronomy 32 as the Backdrop to Psalm 82. Psalm 82 judges the council אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) for their corrupt administration—this also shows that they are not human. The last verse of the psalm shows

what the council אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) were supposed to be administrating. The psalmist implores the God of Israel to rise up and "inherit" all the nations. The lemma behind "inherit" (נחל, *nchl*) is precisely the same lemma used to describe Yahweh's punitive judgment of the nations at the tower of Babel. He allotted the nations to the sons of God, and allotted those same divine beings to the nations that he was disinheriting. The key passages are Deut 32:8–9 and its parallel, Deut 4:19–20:

- Deuteronomy 32:8: "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance (נחל, *nchl*), when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God (בני האלהים, *bny h'lhym*) But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage (נַחֲלָתוֹ, *nachalatho*)."

- Deuteronomy 4:19: "Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, whom the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance (נַחֲלָה, *nachalah*), as you are this day."

Both of these passages assume the reality of other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). Passages in Deut 4:19–20 through 32:8–9 identify the "host of heaven" as "other gods" (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, *elohim acherim*) worshiped by Israelites in defiance of Deut 4:19–20. For example, Deut 29:23–25 (Deut 29:24–26 in English) contains phrases found in Deut 32:8–9, where the nations were allotted by Yahweh to the sons of God:

"All the nations will say, ' ( )Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' Then people will say, ' ( )It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, *elohim acherim*) and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them.' "

Deuteronomy 32:17 identifies these אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) (the hosts of heaven and sons of God) as demons—real beings (Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:17"). These אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are not simply idols, pieces of wood and stone.

Ancient Near Eastern idolaters knew that idols were not the actual deities they represent. While both the entity and the cult object might be called אֱלֹהִ֣ים (*elohim*), this does not mean that ancient people considered a human-made statue to be identical to the god it looked like. As Robins, a scholar of ancient cult objects notes: "When a non-physical being manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance … In order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth.… This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine man realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its ' (')bodies,' in all locations, all at one time" (Robins, "Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt," 1–2).

Human Elder-Judges of Israel and Plural אֱלֹהִ֣ים (*elohim*). There are passages that seem to use אֱלֹהִ֣ים (*elohim*) to mean the human elders of Israel acting as judges, but this is not the correct reading.

Exodus 22:6–8 (translation from the JPS Tanakh):

"When a man gives money or goods to another for safekeeping, and they are stolen from the man's house—if the thief is caught, he shall pay double; if the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall come near to God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*) that he has not laid hands on the other's property. In all charges of misappropriation—pertaining to an ox, an ass, a sheep, a garment, or any other loss, whereof one party alleges, ' (')This is it'—the case of both parties shall come before God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*): he whom God (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) declares guilty (יַרְשִׁיעֻן, *yarshi'un*) shall pay double to the other."

If the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) in Exod 22:6–8 were human beings (the elder-judges of Israel), Psa 82 may be describing Israelite judges. The plural predicate in Exod 22:8 (יַרְשִׁיעֻן, *yarshi'un*) would seem to support this—if the passage speaks of Israel's judges rendering decisions for the people. However, there are several problems with this use of the passage.

First, these judges (if הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*; and אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*; are plural and referring to people) give decisions for the nation of Israel—not the nations of the world as is the case in Psa 82 and Deut 32.

Also, אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) in Exod 22:8 might be singular, and might not refer to human beings.

Exodus 18:13–24—where Moses appoints judges—might suggest that אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) in Exod 22:8 are humans. However, the story of the judges uses אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) to refer to God:

“The next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. But when Moses’ father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, ‘ (‘)What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening? Moses replied to his father-in-law, ‘ (‘)It is because the people come to me to inquire of God (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*). When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God.’ But Moses’ father-in-law said to him, ‘ (‘)The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) be with you! You represent the people before God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*): you bring the disputes before God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*) and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied.’ Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said.”

There is nothing in Exodus 18 to suggest that אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) or הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) are plural—these refer to the singular God of Israel. The same is true of Exodus 22. A singular translation referring to God Himself is the correct reading. Without evidence for a plural translation, the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) cannot be assumed to be the elders of Israel. Also, the men appointed by Moses in Exod 18 are never actually called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) or הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) in the text. This account of the appointment of judges, then, does not support the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in Psa 82 being humans.

There is one other passage that speaks of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in a context similar to that of Exod 22:8. Exodus 21:2–6 reads:

"When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, ' (׳)I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to God (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*), and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever."

It is possible that the master is commanded to bring the slave before the elder-judges of Israel (הָאֱלֹהִים, *ha'elohim*) before piercing his ear. However, this unlikely.

First, הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) can be singular, referring to the God of Israel—as in Exod 18 and Exod 22. The promise about the status of the slave is being made in truth before God. However, there is evidence that the redactor-scribes responsible for the final form of the text did not interpret הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) as singular—and also did not interpret a plurality as referring to human beings. The parallel passage in Deut 15 shows that redactors saw הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) as semantically plural: the parallel in Deut 15:17 removes the word הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) from the instruction. If this were thought to mean the God of Israel, the redactors would not have removed it from the text. Again, if הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) had been understood as plural humans, Israel's judges, they would not have removed it. If הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) were intended as a semantically plural word that referred to gods, then the reason for deleting was theological (Gordon, "אלהים, *'lhym*; in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers"). Gordon argued that הָאֱלֹהִים (*ha'elohim*) in Exod 21:6 referred to "household gods" like the *teraphim* of other passages. Bringing a slave into one's home in patriarchal culture required the consent and approval of one's ancestors—departed human dead, אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*)—as in 1 Sam 28:13. This phrase was later removed after Israel's struggle with idolatry. Only a plural referring to multiple divine beings can coherently explain the deletion. As a result, this passage also does not support the plural human אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) view.

Prophets and the Divine Council

Prophetic Commissioning: The Classical Prophets. There is also a connection between the divine council and the office of prophet (1 Kings 22).

A prophet or prophetess was a spokesperson for Yahweh. They were commissioned in an encounter with the divine: the prophet appeared in the divine throne room, where the council met and decrees were issued (Kingsbury, "Prophets and the Council of Yahweh"; Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council"). Isaiah was taken to the throne-room of Yahweh (Isa 6:1–8), and the throne of the LORD came to Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1–14, 26–28). Jeremiah was called by the word of the Lord (Jer 1:4). This word was Yahweh (Jer 1:6–7), but was embodied in human form (Jer 1:9). Yahweh refers to this call when He said of the false prophets, "If they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds" (Jer 23:16, 22).

Prophetic Commissioning: The Broader Context. Someone who serves as the righteous spokesperson for God is also a prophet. God often meets with humans for spiritual business in the Bible:

- God walked with Adam in the garden, the divine abode. He was God's first human representative. Job 15:7–8 apparently alludes to this scene, as Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, asks Job, "Are you the first man who was born? Or were you brought forth before the hills? Have you listened in the council (הַבְסוֹד, *havsod*) of God? Have you restricted wisdom to yourself?"
- Enoch "prophesied" (Jude 14; 15) and "walked with God" (Gen 5:24).
- Noah also "walked with God" (Gen 6:9). He was a "herald of righteousness" (2 Pet 2:5), and warned his fellow men of the coming judgment of the flood (1 Pet. 3:20).
- The glory of Lord "appeared" to Abraham before he journeyed to Haran (Acts 7:2–4; Gen 15:1).
- Yahweh appeared to Isaac (Gen 26:1–5) and Jacob (Gen 28:10–22; 31:11–13; 32:22–32; see Hos 12:3–4). The patriarchs were Yahweh's spokesmen, through whom the world would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3).
- He commissioned Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–15) and many subsequent occasions (e.g., 19:16–20:21; 24:9–18; 33:7–11).
- Yahweh also directly commissioned the elders of Israel under Moses (Num 11:24–25).
- He also commissioned Joshua (Deut 31:14–23; Josh 5:13–15).
- Gideon met both Yahweh and the angel who was Yahweh—simultaneously (Judges 6).
- Deborah received messages from Yahweh under "the Palm of Deborah" (Judg 4:4–5).
- The word of the Lord "appeared" to Samuel to inform him of Eli's fate (1 Sam 3:20–21).

The Divine Council as Prophetic Warriors and Witnesses. The prophets sometimes refer to the divine council when they declare eschatological holy war (Miller, "Call to War"). The divine council (along with human warriors) forms a cosmic army on the day of the Lord (Isa 13:1–8; Joel 3:11–12; Zech 14:1–5). This language draws upon other material in the Hebrew Bible that describes the divine council as an army (Deut 33:1–5; Psa 68:16–17; 2 Kgs 6:15–17). This is also the context for the common title for Israel's God, "Lord of hosts"—"host" is a word used frequently in the Hebrew Bible for a military force (e.g., 2 Sam 3:23; Psa 108:12).

The divine council is the army of God, but also witnesses God's decrees and acts. This idea is common outside the Hebrew Bible in other descriptions of divine councils (Bokovy, "Invoking the Council as Witnesses"). God often commands an unidentified group in a context that rules out a human audience (Cross, "The Council of Yahweh"). "*Comfort*, *comfort* my people, says your God" (Isa 40:1–2). The two imperatives "comfort" are grammatically plural in Hebrew, as are the ensuing commands "*Speak* tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her" (Isa 40:3). These commands are not directed at Jerusalem or Israel, for they are the objects of the commands—they may be directed at the divine council (Cross, "The Council of Yahweh"). Amos 3 describes the Lord's intention to punish Israel. In Amos 3:7, we read that "the Lord God does nothing without revealing his council (סוֹד, *sod*) to the prophets." Plural imperatives follow: "*Proclaim* to the strongholds … and *say*" and "*Hear* and *testify* against the house of Jacob, declares the Lord God, the God of hosts" (Amos 3:10; 3:13). Again, Israel and Judah are not the recipient of the commands—the divine council may be called upon to witness the judgment of the Lord (Bokovy, "Invoking the Council as Witnesses").

The Divine Council and New Testament Views of Christ

The binitarian structure of the Israelite divine council has implications for the high view of Christ in the New Testament (Segal, "Trinitarian"; Stuckenbruck, "Angel"; Boyarin, "Memra")

The Second Power in Heaven / Second Yahweh. A number of Jewish writers ca. 516 BC—AD 70 offered opinions as to the identity of the "second Yahweh," the second power in heaven (Mach, "Concepts of Jewish Monotheism"; Hurtado, "How on Earth"; McGrath, *The Only True God*; Fossum, "Name"). These Jewish writers suggested significant men from the Old Testament—such as Adam, Enoch, Abraham, and Moses—and specific angels—Gabriel, Michael, and the "Prince of the Host" from Daniel 10. Some did not attempt to further identify the angel of Yahweh (Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*; Hannah, *Michael and Christ*; Stuckenbruck, "Angel").

For Christians, the second Yahweh was Jesus. It is for this reason that the New Testament describes Jesus with all the descriptions of Yahweh's co-regent: the name (which Jesus manifests by his presence: John 17:6, 11–12, 26), the word (John 1:1), the cloud-rider (Matt 26:64), wisdom (1 Cor 1:24), and the angel of Yahweh (Jude 5; Num 14:29; Fossum, "Name"; Fossum, "Image"; Segal, "Two Powers"; Boyarin, "Memra").

Jesus as the Unique Son of God (μονογενής, *monogenēs*). Jesus is the "only begotten" son of God—but "only begotten" is a confusing translation. The Greek word is μονογενής (*monogenēs*). Not only does the

translation "only begotten" seem to contradict the obvious statements in the Old Testament about other sons of God, it sounds as though there was a time when the Son did not exist—that He had a beginning. The Council of Nicaea in 425 taught that the Son had always existed, but the idea of the uncreated, eternal Son had been understood since the beginning of the Church—it was believed to be the teaching of the New Testament.

The Greek word μονογενής (*monogenēs*) doesn't actually mean "only begotten." It presents a problem neither with respect to Jesus having a beginning, nor with respect to divine "sons of God" who are called gods (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*) in the Old Testament. The confusion extends from a misunderstanding of the root of the Greek word. For many years, μονογενής (*monogenēs*) was thought to have derived from two Greek terms, μόνος (*monos*, "only") and γεννάω (*gennaō*, "to beget, bear"). Scholars of Greek eventually discovered, though, that the second part of the word μονογενής (*monogenēs*) does not come from the Greek verb γεννάω (*gennaō*), but rather the noun γένος (*genos*, "class, kind"). The term literally means "one of a kind" or "unique" with no connotation to time, origin or solitary existence. The validity of this understanding is shown by the New Testament itself. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called Abraham's μονογενής (*monogenēs*)—but Isaac was *not* the only son Abraham fathered, since he fathered Ishmael prior to Isaac. The term must mean that Isaac was Abraham's *unique* son—the son of the covenant promises and the line through which the messiah would come. Just as Yahweh is an אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), and no other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are Yahweh, so Jesus is the unique son, and no other sons of God are like Him.

Jesus' Quotation of Psalm 82 in John 10. John 10:34 may seem to imply that the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in Psa 82:6 are human beings. However, this interpretation nullifies any sense that Jesus' argument in John 10 is a defense of His own deity. In John 10:30, Jesus tells his audience that He and the Father were one. The Jews were deeply offended by this comment, as indicated by their response in 10:31–33. They picked up stones to kill Him, for they thought He was making Himself equal with God. Jesus' response is usually interpreted as a concession. That is, He was only saying of Himself what the Jews could say of themselves, and used Psa 82:6 to show that humans can be called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). This view both ignores the Old Testament context of the divine council and undermines John's presentation of the deity of Jesus in his gospel:

- Jesus' asserted that He and the Father were one (Jn 10:30).
- The Jews thought this was blasphemy—Jesus was claiming *to be God* (Jn 10:33).
- In defense of His claim that He was one with God, Jesus quoted Psa 82:6.
- Following the quotation, He states that the Father is in Him, and He was in the Father.

The usual interpretation of this passage—that the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) were human—is based on two assumptions:

1. Judaeo-Christian monotheism could not have other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*).

2. "To whom the word of God came" refers to the Jews who received the law at Sinai (i.e. the Pharisees' forefathers).

However, both of these assumptions are wrong. It is already clear that there were other uses of אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). Also, "the word of God" was not the Law, and those who received it were not human. Psalm 82:6–7 says, "I said, ' (')You are gods (אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*), even sons of the Most High (בְּנֵי עֶלְיוֹן, *beney elyon*), all of you; nevertheless, like humans you will die, and fall like any prince.' "

The speaker ("I") in the passage is the God of Israel, the God who is standing in the council in 82:1 among the lesser אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). God announces that the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of the council are His sons, but because of their corruption (Psa 82:2–5), they will lose their immortality. The "word of God" in the original context is *the specific utterance of Yahweh to His council members*. They, in turn, are the recipients of that word (utterance). The recipients are not the Israelites at Sinai or any other group of Jews.

Jesus refers *to the original utterance* spoken by God when He quoted the psalm, *not* the Jewish nation receiving revelation, at Sinai or at any other time. Jesus is defending his statement to be one with the Father by reminding his hearers that their Old Testament teaches that there were divine sons of God who were אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*).

Differences in the views:

Common Interpretation	**This Proposal**
Jesus' strategy assumes אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are human	Jesus' strategy assumes אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are divine
The "word of God that came" = revelation from God at Sinai, or some other event	The "word of God that came" = the utterance itself in Psa 82:6—the pronouncement from God

"to whom the word of God came" = the Israelites at Sinai, or the Jews generally	"to whom the word of God came" = the אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of the divine council in 82:1
The Jews are the "sons of the Most High" and אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*)—so Jesus can call himself an אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) as well, since he's a Jew. (This view emphasizes Jesus' mortality)	The Jews are not אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), and Jesus reminds them that their Scriptures say there are other אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) who are divine sons.

In John 10:36–38, Jesus asserts that his high status as the Son is based on Him doing the works of His Father: the Father is "in him." This phrase parallels Exod 23:20–21, where the Name—Yahweh's Presence—was *in* the angel of Yahweh. In John 10:36–38, Jesus claims that the Presence is in Him. He is claiming to be the second power, or second Yahweh, which would in turn mean He was Lord of the divine council with the invisible Yahweh (the Father). Thus, Jesus' claim of oneness with the Father is developed by the quotation and by what follows. The result is a powerful claim to deity, consistent with the rest of the gospel of John.

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